[J. C. Hess]

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Folk Stuff - Life as Cowboy [88?]

Phipps, Woody

Rangelore

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J.C. Hess, 68, was born in Red Wing, Wis., where his father engaged in the lumber business and owned several saddle horses. Hess learned to ride at an early age. The family moved to Kan. in 1876, and established a stock farm on the land they homesteaded near Hutchinson. They moved again to the Choctaw Nation in the Territory which is now Beaver Co., Okla., in 1886, and established a ranch. When 25, Hess left his family and was employed on a number of ranches in N.M. and Okla. When 40, he quit the ranching business and was employed by cattle speculators and commission men in the Ft. Worth Stock Yards until his age forced him to retire in 1931, to the Home for Aged Masons, 12 Mi. E. of Ft. Worth, Tex. His story:

“Why yes, I know something about cattle and the old cow punchers. While I was born in Red Wing, Wisconsin, I spent my life with cattle after I was six years old. My dad was in the lumber business there and used several hosses so I learned to ride before I was any good at anything else.

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“When I was six, dad moved us to a place he homesteaded near Hutchinson, Kansas, and bought about 300 head of cattle which he branded the H Bar. You make it with an H, and continue the middle line of the H on out to make a bar after the H. I don't recall how many head of hosses he bought but he also started to raising them for the market.

“Dad was successful there and made plenty of money but he couldn't get anymore land. The other fellows around him wanted to hold onto their property and they were doing right well too, so dad decided to move to the Territory and establish a real ranch where he could go into the cattle business right instead of running a farm along with a ranch.

“We made the move when I was 16 years old, to the Choctaw C12 - 2/11/41 - Texas 2 Indian Nation. The place we settled on was located in what is now Beaver county, Oklahoma.

“I don't recall just how long it took us to drive the stock from the Kansas place to the Oklahoma place but it was somewhere around a month and around 400 critters with about 60 brood mares and 15 colts. I was thrilled a-plenty when we got there for there were Indians all around us. I always expected to have trouble with them but we never did. The only trouble was a beef missing now and then that they'd took for meat. That didn't bother us any. In fact, because dad didn't mind them taking just one now and then, made them our best friends and they'd help us in any way they could.

“My older brother's name was 'Butch', and dad helped us to get a start of our own. We soon had a brand called the 'CO', and made it with a big C and put a little c inside the C. Since the land was open and not a fence anywhere, we all ran our cattle together with the other ranchers in the Territory.

“When the Spring roundup came off for the calf branding, we'd all get together and roundup everything all the way South to the Red River, and West and East and North as the hills let the cattle graze. You see, since there were no fences, they'd graze in one

place 'til it was grazed down, then move on. We had plenty of hosses in our remuda because as I said before, dad raised our hosses and we boys broke them in.

“Breaking hosses was considered just part of the day's work and everybody had to break his own hosses in. We all had from half a dozen to a dozen hosses in our personal strings and kept them all in one bunch when we weren't using one. That was what we called the 'Remuda'. There was one man assigned to the remuda at all times 3 but when he needed help, he called on the rest of us and we'd pitch in and help. About the only time he needed help was when he had a stampede which was seldom because the saddle stock was usually kept in a rope corrall when out on the range. If a coyote or some other varmint got close to the hosses, they'd make a break, rope or no rope. When we'd have to hunt them all up and corall them again.

“Stampedes were a thing to be expected day or night with cattle or hosses. You didn't think anything about it at all except that it caused extra work and sometimes hurt a puncher. We had to take the risks though, because he either worked cattle in those days, or he didn't work. There just wasn't anything else that he could do. You know, I read a lot to pass the time away, and I've naturally read a lot about cowpunchers and cattle. Nearly all the writers tell of cattle on the stomp and bawling at the same time. Well, that's just a dam lie because the minute one of them bawls, that stops the stomp and they all go to eating or laying down to rest. Now, I know because I've been there, Bud.

“There is one other thing about a stomp that few of them got in their stories. That is, about them starting a stomp. Nobody can tell when a stomp is liable to start except in bad weather. When it's hainling or lightning, they're more likely to stomp than at any other time. The other things that start them is a 'Blue Norther' all of a sudden, or some varmint get close to them. Take a skunk now, we all called them whiffle cats, they could get into a herd before you'd know it and the cattle would be up and away before you'd even realize they were up. Most of the time, even when you were right with the herd and on duty, the first you knew about a stomp was a sound like a fast express train going about [?] miles an

hour. Then you knew they 4 on their way and it was up to you and the other waddies to stop it some way or other. If you happened to be about 50 feet out in front, you had the best chance of stopping it because you could try to force the leaders to turn. If you got the leaders to turn and keep turning, the rest of them would follow and they'd all be turning around in the same spot. It was very important to get the stomp stopped just as soon as possible because if they came to a cliff while on the run, they'd all pile up and lots of them would be either killed outright, or ruined. When if they came to a river, they'd all pile up and some would drown. Most stomps usually just run themselves down and stop when one of the critters bawls. That's because it's hard to get in front of the herd.

“Now, the danger to a waddy riding along the side of the herd and keeping them from scattering is practically none. The real danger is to the waddy out in front if the stomp is in the night. In the day time, his hoss has been trained to avoid the gopher holes and other things that might trip him but at night, the hoss can't see any better than the waddy and if it stumbles, the waddy and the hoss is on the ground and in front of the herd without time to get up and beat it out of the way.

“I once saw a [?] by the name of Rowdy McGowan that dad paid to work with us fall in front of a herd that way. He was a poor shot but he immediately shot his hoss, then laid down on the side away from the stomp and shot four or five critters in front of him. When they piled up, they made a block that the critters side stepped and went around. You talk about a sick looking waddy, Rowdy took the cake. He didn't have a bit of color in his face but he 5 went right to the remuda, roped him out a fresh hoss and joined the chase. That's the stuff a cowpuncher had to be made of to keep his hand in. Now, if he'd have gone to the camp like some of our cow boys of today would have, he'd have never been able to face another stomp again. As it is, he practiced shooting after that 'til he was a pretty good shot.

“I never mentioned the Fall roundup. That roundup was mostly to gather beef for the market and took more work thanthe Spring roundup because instead of turning your

branded critters loose, you kept them in one herd for the trail drive. Now, this brings another thing up that I've read about. First, let me tell you an experience I had here at the home one day.

“I wont mention his name because it would embarass him but he'd heard from some way, (I don't talk much about my cattle experience) that I was an old cow puncher and he came in and told me about his experiences. You know, that's about an old man can do, is live in the past. He told about driving herds up the trail and about 10,000 head in one drive and 12,000 in another. Well, I kept still 'til he'd finished, then he asked me where I'd worked and so on. After I told him a little, his face got red and he said, 'Don't pay any attention to what I said about those big herds on the trail. You know, I've said so much about it that the number just got bigger every time I told it.'

“Now, a trail drive is never over 3,000 head at a time because you stand a big chance of losing some [then?]. You come to mountain trails, long distances between water holes which causes a stampede when they smell the water if the wind is toward them, land owners 6 force you to narrow your trail herd down so it wont trample much grass and so on. Any man that wasn't a down right fool, never started out with over 3,500 head for any distance.

“Our first trail herds went to Abilene, Kansas, then got closer 'til the rail road got right up to the Indian Territory. The shipping point for the Territory ranchers was 38 miles North of our place. While it was a small town by the name of Englewood, Kansas, it was a big shipping point. The road was called the '[?] Extension' and was an extension of the Santa Fe System.

“Now, about the rustling, there was many a wet rope swung in the Territory but they left our part of the country alone. One of the reasons was my dad. He was kind of a queer duck that felt that if everybody tended to his own business well, he wouldn't have time to tend to somebody else's. He would go to the long loopers as soon as he heard they were

in the Territory and say, 'If you bother any of Mack Hess' stuff, I'll get you sure'. You'd think some of them would drop him for getting tough with them but they never did. Instead, they just never showed up in that neck of the country.

“Of course, they bothered other people's stuff and lots of them were made good Indians. That's an expression I used because it carries what I mean but I'll explain what a good Indian is. It's a dead one. The Indians never bothered our stuff as I've already said. Vigilance committees were formed from time to time and dad was invited to join but he always refused. Then they'd invite my bud and me but we took after dad and turned them down. A good thing too because those things always turn out bad after they do the good they set out for. In the first place, we had law in those days the same as we have now 7 except when we first went to the Territory. It was then 'No man's Land'. We all figured that it was the law's place to handle those things and we never meddled.

“One of the hangings I was invited to take part in was when a couple of fellows by the name of May and Weever were caught hoss rustling. The ranchers in that part of the country had missed quite a few head from time to time and they were mad for sure when these fellows were caught. The men that caught them though, took them to Paris, Texas, where there was a United States court. While they were still in jail, a bunch organized to go down and break the jail down, get the rustlers and hang them. I saw them leave the Territory but I never went with them. What I meant to say was, when they left the Choctaw Nation in the Territory. We were also invited to join the Klux but we figured they'd finally do like the Vigilance committees, get to satisfying personal grudges after they's done the good they could do.

“After I got to be [25?], dad owned several sections of land and the acreage I'd proved up on and homesteaded after I was 21. I decided this to him because I wanted to give it to him. Besides the land, dad, my bud and me owned quite a few critters and hosses and that chould have been enough to keep a fellow satisfied but I got a hanker to work for some big outfits where they had more excitement. Then too, I wanted to see some country too

so I just up and left my bud in charge of our critters and went to New Mexico. Altogether, I guess there wasn't less then 100 brood mares, about 35 colts, and over 1,400 head of critters. The most prized bunch of critters was a herd of about 60 fine geldings we used for saddlestock and sale. While they weren't worth as much as the cattle, still we worked them so much that we got attached to them and liked them most. 8 “I left the home ranch and stopped at the YL outfit which was located near Fort Supply, in the Territory. They run about [?] head of cattle and we had plenty of excitement alright but we worked almost all the time because there was so much to do and so few waddies to handle the work.

“Of course, the better the rider, the better the pay but anybody could go to work on the YL. They'd size you up and take your pedigree, then put you in the place you'd do the most good if you wasn't much at handling cattle.

I spoke of reading lots awhile ago, I've read a lot about dead shots in my time but I never saw but one. While I was figured a fair shot, I couldn't hit but three out of six at a board about a foot long and a foot wide after jerking it out of the holster at full speed on my hoss. You'd do it by jerking it out and shooting as fast as you could trigger.

“This shot I spoke of was a fellow that came mysteriously to the YL. His name was [Dan Ralston?] but that was all he ever told. He didn't have to tell anything else and never did while the rest of us told everything we ever knew from time to time. I don't want you to get the impression that we talked all the time. When we talked, it was while we were riding the range together and not working but just going somewhere, or, at night around the campfire or the chuck wagon. He told lots of tall tales besides sang and talk about our pasts. Dan never joined in on this but we figured from his talk, that he was from a Canadian Range, or somewhere in the North and was wanted by the law.

“This Dan never showed off, nor bragged but when the occasion arose, as it did with all range work and at unexpected times, Dan 9 was a miracle with a gun. Because he almost had to enter the friendly contests the boys would have from time to time to pass away the

time and have a little fun, he'd ride and shoot with the rest of us. At the same distance I'd shoot my board, he'd shoot a silver dollar and follow it across the ground as it bounced under the impact of the bullets. I tell you, he was an absolute miracle! I was still on the YL when he left, and he left the way he came. Just vanished into the night when the rest of us were asleep.

“When I left the YL, I went back to Beaver county and went to work for the AUY. Old Alec Young owned this outfit and run about 60 hosses in his remuda with over 5,000 critters on the range. I worked there for a spell, then lit out for New Mexico.

“The first berth I got there was on the Anchor D, which was owned [by?] a widow woman and run by Sweet, Sligh, and Shannonhouse, who ran the Triple S to the South. You make the Anchor D by burning an Anchor first, then burning a D right under it. The Anchor D run about 12,000 head in the Saint Andrews Mountains.

“I put in a season on the Anchor D, then drifted South to the Triple S. They made their brand by burning an S on the critter's left shoulder, side and hip. Three S's or, the Triple S. It was an ordinary ranch of about 12,000 cattle and run about the same as the Anchor D.

“The next season, I drifted farther South to the Bell outfit just above the Canadian River and North of Tuscosa. It was another ordinary ranch with around 12,000 head and they burnt a bell on their critter's left side. The difference in this ranch was that it was owned by some Englishmen and you never saw the owners. The ram rod 10 was Bud Wilson, a man that was well known for his honesty in every trick, and a good rider, roper, a fair shot, and a real cow man. He knew cattle better than most people know their children. I'll tell you right now, that when Bud Wilson told you he could do a thing, he could, and when he told you to do a thing, you'd better. He wouldn't tell you to do anything he couldn't do, though. That covered a pretty big field. The thing about it, is that men were he-men in those days and you could depend on a man's word. They'd tell tall tales alright, but you knew when they started in what it'd turn out to be.

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“Well, then I drifted on South the next season to the old LX outfit. Seems like all the boys worked on the LX at one time or another. All the drifters seemed to make the LX on their way North or South, whichever way they were headed. The hospitality there was just like it has been pictured in books. You didn't have to wait to be invited to stop. Before you got into the ranch yard, somebody's sing out, 'Light, Stranger, Chuck your hoss and c,mon in to the kitchen'.

“The LX was a big outfit and run over 60,000 cattle along the Canadian River below Tuscosa. Of all the ranches I had dealings with, the LX was about the friendliest one. We'd have contests at every chance and I want you to know that a contest on the LX was something to write home about. I met a couple of Oregon boys by the name of Jess Cook and Johnny Brennan. Those boys could ride to a fare-you-well. I never saw either one of them bucked off. In fact, Jess Cook rode a hoss by the name of 'Black Lightning' that had never been ridden 'til he rode him. That hoss was a man-killer and had killed three or four punchers that went on in spite of what 11 what they'd been told about the hoss. What they'd figured on, was making a rep for themselves as a bronc stomper right.

“I rode Black Lightning myself after Jess pulled the trick. I often wonder if I'd have rode him before, knowing what I did on the hoss. I kind of like to believe I'd have rode him had the proposition been put up to me right. because I tried to do everything I saw anybody else do. In order to hold top puncher's pay, you had to be able to do anything any other top puncher could do and I knew that.

“Another rider I met on the LX was Tad Southerd. He was tops at riding most any hoss flesh he ever saw. As a rule, he did nearly all the bronc busting for the LX but it was because he wanted to. They didn't force you to bust broncs. It was just a part of your work and a puncher usually busted what he used in his string. You'd naturally lose a couple of hosses a year anyway, and you just replaced those you lost. Personally, I've lost as

high as six in one season. They'd break their leg in a gopher hole, get gored by a steer, or anything that could happen to a hoss to make it useless for cow work.

“About the best rider I ever saw was John Springer. He worked all over New Mexico but mostly on the LIT ranch. I saw him ride in a contest when he was working on the LX at the time I was, and he put up a good ride on a hoss that was pretty bad. He made a better show when he rode by such as, hitting the hoss with your stetson, roweling, or anything else that would make him madder. When you did that, the ride usually lasted longer and made a better show. 12 “In the first place, John rode about the best all around hoss I ever saw, for a saddle hoss. He owned him personally and named him Browny, because he was a brown Mustang with a little Steeldust Spanish blood in him. That hoss could cut, peg, cut out, race, jump hurdles, in fact, that Gelding could do anything you ever heard of a hoss doing. He could almost talk. Any puncher could walk up to Browny and ask him where John was, and the hoss would go get him if he had to go into the bunkhouse or where ever he had to find him, nuzzle him, and lead him to the puncher that asked for John. Us boys treated that hoss like some folks do a pooch. We'd get it apples, sugar, anything it would eat. And we'd talk to him and try to believe he'd understand everything we'd say. I do believe he'd understand some of it. One of our jokes was to say something nasty about one of the waddies around him, then ask Browny if it wasn't so, and he'd shake his head up and down. Then, no matter who you picked out, unless it was John himself, and asked Browny if he had any sense, he'd shake his head no.

“Well, I got tired of the LX and drifted up to a real sure enough ranch. The ST. It was located right out of Tucumeari, or Blue Hole. The Blue Hole name came from a huge volcano crater that stood out on an open plain. Just a big hill with no other hills around. A sort of a freak of nature. Well, the ST was owned by some Englishmen and must have had right at 400,000 head on it because it was split into eight divisions and each division had over 40,000 on it. I worked under a fellow by the name of Eubanks. He was the ram rod over his section just as the other [?] seven divisions were under the direction of foremen, and all took their orders out of headquarters just like a big factory. 13 “I didn't care much

for the work on the ST because I felt like I was sort of a cog in a machine but I lived about the same there as I did on the other places. I mean by that, that I lived in a dugout when I was at headquarters, ate at the chuck wagon, had contests from time to time that sort of livened things up, and in general, it was about the same as the others excepting the roundups used more men, there were more cattle to brand, and there were more trail drives made.

“The ST sold cattle everywhere. I went on two drives from the ranch to Abilene, Kansas. It wasn't necessary the last time to go to Abilene as we could have shipped them from a place much closer but the ram rod decided to go on as he had before. Both times, when we got to the Kansas border, the land owners met us with guns and made us narrow our herds down as far as possible and begrudged us every drop of water the critters took even after they were paid. They were the ones that helped railroad construction along by forcing the cattlemen to go to the nearest railroad and ship to his market. Most of the cowmen were highly in favor of the railroads because it got their critters to the market with less wear and tear on the whole. The usual trail herd really benefitted and got fatter on the trail because they were grazed along the way. Sometimes though, you couldn't get the grazing just right and the critters lost weight. On a trail herd of several thousand critters, the money loss in beef was something to think about.

“I only made two other trail drives that were longer than the drive from the ST to Abilene. I made one from the White Oaks section where the Hall ranch was located to Lewiston, Montana. The herd was about 1,500 Bell critters and about 800 others from 14 some grease pot outfits that only owned a few head at a time. The other drive was from the Saint Andrews Mountain section and was 15,00 cattle from the Anchor D and 1,500 from the Triple S. These drives lasted through November and December and were really tough.

“There were times when you'd have to go a couple of days without water for the stock. Once, they went three days and when the wind happened to come from the West and they smelled water, they struck out and all we could do was just follow and hope they wouldn't

many of them get hurt. I had one experience of a herd smelling water for 15 miles! When a herd started toward a water hole, even if it was off the trail, we'd follow along. They'd get to the water's edge, and those coming from behind would push them on out into the water. When you'd get to the water, the river would be a mess of cattle and they'd drink 'til they were as round as a ball. They'd remind you somewhat of these balloons. All big and round in the middle.

“The time they smelt water for 15 miles, I got in on about the middle of the herd and watched them shove the others in, then come on down to the water, only to get shoved in themselves. They drank and drank, then came out on the bank and laid down in the shade of some trees that happened to be there and rested awhile, then went back two or three times more to drink some more. When most of them had gotten about all they wanted, there were at least 1,000 head over on the other side of the river. They just swam across when they got into the water so deep they couldn't stand on the bottom. It took us a day and a half to get straightened up out of that mess because we had to go over and get the others 15 on the other side. The way that was done was, the ram rod had to call for volunteers to go over. It wasn't required of you to risk your life in a river that was at almost flood tide like that one was, so he called for volunteers.

“I was one of the first to volunteer. I figured that it wouldn't be so hard because my hoss was a good swimmer and I knew I could swim it across and back if necessary. Well, I was the first to hit the water. It was coming down so fast that the hoss couldn't make any head way so I let the hoss have it's head. That is, I turned the reigns loose so he could swim on across without me worrying him. He still didn't go very good so I got off and caught ahold of his tail, figuring on mounting him before he came out of the water.

“It was a mistake to get off in the way I was because I'd taken all my clothes off and had tied them on the back of my pack. When the clothes became water soaked, I had trouble in holding on to the tail, then accidently lost my hold altogether. One of the boys on the bank jumped off after me to save me from drowning. When he got to me, I was floating

on my back and warned him that I'd sink him if he caught on to me to hold him self out of the water. He assured me that he was there to help me and told me not to catch onto him that way either but to hold onto his bandana and he'd tow me out. He took me over to the side where the strays were, and after I got out, I was pretty well tired out but ready to go on after drying off and warming by [?] fire. When I said I aws going on after coming so near drowning, the ram rod didn't have a bit of trouble in getting all the volunteers he needed to handle the strays. 16 “Well, we finished that drive without much more trouble. We found good grazing and plenty of water nearly all the way and after all, that's the cowman's real job. When he has plenty of grass and water, he has little else to worry over. I've seen it so dry at times that you'd have to find some quick sand, run the cattle over two sides, which would force the water up in the middle, then let a few at a time drink from that place. After awhile, you'd have to dig a hole in the place where the water was coming up because it'd be getting scarcer. That was an unusual case, though.

“I guess I was about 35 years old when I left the ST to go to the Kansas City Stock Yards to work in some capacity, handling cattle on the yards. I hired out to Curr and Ryan, cattle speculators, and they sent me here to Fort Worth because I really knew cattle. I don't say this to brag, but because I grew up around cattle and would have been awful dumb if it didn't finally soak in. Curr and Ryan just bought cattle to speculate on. They'd buy a herd, grade the critters into two or three grades, then sell them off that way. They'd pull every stunt they could think of to make some money on a herd. We'd handle from 65,000 to 70,000 head a year, right here on the yards and other places close around here.

“I worked for them 'til I was about 40 years old, then took a herd of 3,000 steers up to my old stomping ground in the Choctaw Nation. I was the ram rod, or Foreman, and I used the same old brand I had with my bud. The [?] brand, I was located close to Tishomingo, Oklahoma, and kept the herd there 'til we sold them the next year. hen I came on back to

Fort Worth and worked for the different commission men 'til old age forced me to quit and come out here to the Home for Aged Masons in 1931. I never married.